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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000713

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR S/CT AMB DELL DAILEY  
ALSO FOR A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO AND ZARATE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/15/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [EAIR](#) [SA](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: TRIPOLI MP: WHO WILL DEFEND TRIPOLI --  
THE ARMY OR AL QAEDA?

REF: A. BEIRUT 635

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 680

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) Pro-March 14 Tripoli MP Mosbah Ahdab and prominent Sunni leaders from Tripoli conveyed their deep concern to us on May 16 that if the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) does not protect the Sunnis in Tripoli, some moderate Future Movement supporters may turn to Sunni extremist groups for protection.

Ahdab noted that Sunni muftis, in collaboration with some leading Tripoli politicians, recently signed a memorandum asking the LAF to assume the protection of its party offices and to prevent militia activity. Assuming the LAF would bow to Hizballah and refrain from protecting the Sunnis in Tripoli, Ahdab interpreted this memorandum to strip Sunni militias of their weapons, leaving the Sunni residents exposed to Hizballah and its allied militias. Refusing to sign the memorandum, Ahdab now looks to the LAF to provide protection and remove the 80 pro-Syrian Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) fighters who have positioned themselves in Tripoli since the clashes began in Beirut on May 7. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Tripoli MP Mosbah Ahdab hosted the Charge, DATT, and EmbOffs to a luncheon at his home in Tripoli on May 16. He invited nearly a dozen prominent business, civil society, and former military leaders to convey the mood in northern Lebanon.

MEMORANDUM TO STRIP  
TRIPOLI OF PROTECTION  
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[1](#)3. (C) Ahdab shared with us a May 11 memorandum prepared by the Sunni Mufti of Tripoli, Sheikh Malek Chaar, and signed by notable politicians from Tripoli (representing both March 14 and March 8), including former PM Najib Mikati, former PM Omar Karami, Minister of Public Works and Transportation Mohammed Safadi, Future Movement MP Samir Jisr, March 8 cleric Fathi Yakan, and Future Coordinator Abed al-Ghani Kabbara and his brother Mohammed. The memorandum commits the signatories to preventing any militia presence in and around partisan offices and turns the responsibility over to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

¶4. (C) Ahdab, who says he was the only one to refuse signing, told us that a mufti delegation had approached him shortly after the clashes began in Beirut on May 7 (reftel), asking him to endorse the document. Ahdab said that the mufti of Beirut was not consulted on this matter. Ahdab interpreted the memorandum as a preemptive step to ensure that Hizballah does not take over the offices in Tripoli (as it did in Beirut).

SSNP MILITIA  
ENTERS TRIPOLI  
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¶5. (C) Ahdab told us there was clearly a concern in Tripoli after approximately 80 pro-Syrian SSNP fighters from Koura and Zgharta entered his city immediately after the clashes began in Beirut. (Note: Ahdab reported that the SSNP fighters have remained in Tripoli as of May 16, though the situation had calmed down. End note.) "Their presence was a provocation," Ahdab said, believing that the fighters were preparing to repeat in Tripoli the burning of Future Movement party headquarters and media offices that occurred in Beirut.

HIZBALLAH WILL NOT  
CONTROL TRIPOLI  
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¶6. (C) Ahdab rhetorically asked why Hizballah, which has no support in Tripoli, had opened four offices in the last six

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months in Tripoli. He answered that Hizballah is trying to intimidate Tripolitans. Further, Ahdab added, the Tawheed, another militia that enjoys the protection of Hizballah, is also stationed in Tripoli. The Sunni extremist Salafists are also armed in Tripoli.

¶7. (C) Ahdab explained that he refused to let Hizballah control Tripoli, and that he did not have confidence in the LAF to defend the Sunni residents, adding that Hizballah security official Wafiq Safa "does not let the LAF near." Therefore, he did not want all militias to be disarmed because that would leave Tripoli without any defense (preferring to preserve the Salafist -- which he at times used interchangeably with al Qaeda -- weapons in particular). In sum, Ahdab said he understood the plan would lead to the elimination of all of the Sunni weapons, and Hizballah would benefit because there would be no armed Sunnis to challenge it.

¶8. (C) He posited another scenario where the Salafists step up to defend Tripoli, forcing the LAF to enter as it did against Fatah al-Islam, and the Sunni extremists would be wiped out. This turmoil in the north would leave Hizballah free to concentrate on other areas, he reasoned.

¶10. (C) Nevertheless, Ahdab does not believe Hizballah can take Tripoli easily because it does not have a presence in the north and its opposition allies are small in number. He said many Tripolitans are armed because they are afraid of "being slaughtered" again. (Note: Ahdab was referring to the 1986 massacre when the Syrians killed hundreds of Tripolitans, but purportedly blamed it on the Alawites. End note.)

DISARMAMENT WOULD  
BREED SUNNI EXTREMISM  
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¶11. (C) Further, Ahdab rationalized that if he had agreed to sign the memorandum, the Future supporters would have shifted to extremism in order to defend themselves; in other words, unilateral disarmament would push people to Islamic undamentalism. Instead, Ahdab said he believed firmly in

the Lebanese institutions, and therefore it is the LAF's job to protect Tripoli.

¶12. (C) He added that since he obstructed the muftis' memorandum, "The battle is not over. However, the Hizballah threat remains, and those who would have defeated Hizballah continue to pose a threat for us" (referring to Sunni extremists).

HIZBALLAH PLEASED  
WITH MEMORANDUM  
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¶13. (C) Ahdab believes that Hizballah was pleased with the muftis' memorandum, though the organization had not planned on it. It satisfied Hizballah, he conjectured, because Hizballah had not met with great success fighting the Druze in the Chouf nor did Hizballah want to occupy Beirut for a long period of time.

LAF SHOULD NOW  
DISARM MILITIAS  
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¶14. (C) The LAF should remove the 80 SSNP fighters, Ahdab stated emphatically. (Note: they are reportedly holed up two blocks from the residence of former PM Omar Karami, the stop before our luncheon with Ahdab, and five minutes from Ahdab's residence. End note.) Next, the LAF should prevent Hizballah from providing weapons and assistance to its opposition allies in the north. One of the guests, former General Fadil Adhami, said that there are several disparate militias in Tripoli, ranging from "independent, close to Future, and close to March 8," because they lack confidence in the LAF and believe they need to protect themselves.

¶15. (C) While it was worse during the civil war, he said,

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they can still be a threat because their allegiances shift, often to whoever pays more, but also there was no reconciliation efforts between the Sunni and Alawi, in particular. General Adhami believes that the tensions were intentionally preserved in order to spark future strife as experienced this week.

NEXT STEPS  
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¶16. (C) Ahdab advocated that the best strategy was to request the LAF to remove the 80 SSNP fighters and to return Tripoli to its status prior to May 7. In this scenario, the Salafists and other militias remain armed, though Ahdab ultimately wants all militias disarmed. He said the LAF does not respond to elected officials' pleas for disarmament, but instead it responds to those with weapons. Therefore, Ahdab explained, he wanted the Salafists to retain their weapons in the short-term as leverage to focus the LAF on protecting Tripoli.

¶17. (C) He hinted that March 14 supporters should push opposition allies out of areas where they (the opposition) are considered the minority. He stressed that March 14 should focus on where the opposition is weak. (Note: He implied this when the group was discussing clashes and relations with the small opposition-aligned Alawite community. End note.)

EMPOWERING CIVIL SOCIETY  
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¶18. (C) Future Movement leader Saad Hariri encouraged the civil society leaders in Tripoli to publicly denounce the militias in Tripoli, Ahdab relayed. Ahdab said he is preparing a short paper to be disseminated among civil society members which outlines their expectations from the

LAF. I owe it to civil society, Ahdab explained, because they really want change and they want the LAF to take over. However, he lamented, "You don't get heard if you don't have weapons."

#### DISAPPOINTMENT WITH LAF

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¶19. (C) Ahdab, who is close to fellow Tripolitan Internal Security Forces Chief General Ashraf Rifi, (ref. B) expressed both of their disappointment with LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, saying, "The LAF did not do what it was supposed to do. I do not accept the LAF to be Hizballah's cover." Ahdab said that next-door neighbor Future Coordinator Abdel al-Ghani Kabbara removed his own bodyguards, thus exposing one side of Ahdab's building, and so he turned to Rifi for protection. Rifi reportedly said the ISF was afraid to conflict with the LAF's operations. (Note: We noticed Ahdab found bodyguards from somewhere, as we observed youth, dressed in jeans and t-shirts, holding AK 47's outside his apartment. End note.)

#### SUPPORTED LAF'S FIGHT AGAINST FATAH AL-ISLAM

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¶20. (C) Ahdab noted that the Future supporters in Tripoli supported the LAF's incursion in Nahr al-Barid to fight Fatah al-Islam, but now they wonder whether Fatah al-Islam could have protected them in Tripoli since the LAF did not.

#### AHDAB'S ROLE IN FUTURE MOVEMENT

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¶21. (C) Independently-elected Ahdab was adamant that he wanted to work with Future's leader Saad on "restructuring the Future Movement" to address his concerns of security in Tripoli. "Saad is very popular in Tripoli, and I don't know anyone personally in Saudi Arabia," Ahdab argued, "Therefore we need to work with Saad." However, he relayed, he sensed Saad was reluctant to act. He said later during the luncheon that if Future kicked him out of its party because he is

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pushing for change, then so be it.

#### OPPOSED TO CHANGING TAIF

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¶22. (C) When hearing that Public Works and Transportation Minister Mohammed Safadi called for changing the Taif agreement, Ahdab said he disagreed, saying that a president must first be elected, a new cabinet formed, and a new electoral law drafted, before Taif should be addressed.

#### SHOULD OPEN NORTHERN AIRPORT

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¶23. (C) The luncheon guests agreed that the Rene Mouawad/Kleyate airport in the north should be opened after some technical improvements are made, as a second international airport because they do not feel comfortable traveling to Beirut International Airport. It was noted that Minister Safadi has stated that this is a political decision and that he believes there is not sufficient political support to open the northern airport.

¶24. (U) Biographic Information on Mosbah Ahdab:

Member of Parliament 1996-present.

A member of the March 14 Coalition, Ahdab is generally viewed as the most liberal Sunni MP from North Lebanon. Despite being a member of MP Nassib Lahoud's Democratic Renewal

Movement, Ahdab likes to be seen as an independent political figure.

Ahdab is a political foe to both former Prime Ministers from northern Lebanon Najib Mikati and Omar Karami; both who are pro-Syrian while Ahdab is anti-Syrian. He maintains a good relationship with MP Saad Hariri, although in private he is critical of Hariri, alleging that following the 2005 parliamentary elections Hariri did not fulfill his promises to the people of northern Lebanon for better development projects and economic prosperity.

Ahdab has maintained good ties with Paris and served as France's Honorary Consul in northern Lebanon from 1992 to [1996](#).

Ahdab was born on April 1, 1962 in Tripoli. He earned a B.A. in Economics from the London School of Economics in 1982 and a degree in Business Administration from the European Business School in Paris, France. He is married to Mona al-Mounla and has three children. He speaks Arabic, French, English, Italian, German, and Spanish.

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